

Value Studies and Democratic Citizenship

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A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO VALUE STUDIES

“Value studies” refers to a form of liberal education developed at the European College of Liberal Arts (ECLA) in Berlin between 2003 and 2012. Based on this curricular approach, ECLA introduced its first degree program in 2009 and was formally recognized as a German university in 2011. The first cohort of students received their bachelor of arts degree in value studies in 2012. Our aim in this essay is to explain how the value studies curriculum honors and promotes ideals of democratic citizenship. But first, we present a brief sketch of the curriculum.

As the name suggests, value studies is a curriculum focused on questions about values. In an institution without departments, students work with faculty from a variety of academic backgrounds on moral, political, economic, epistemic, religious, and aesthetic questions with the understanding that such questions are naturally and deeply connected. While students read and write a great deal, often reflect in solitude, and occasionally listen to lectures, the central activity supported by the curriculum is conversation in small seminars and tutorials.

The assumed connectedness of our questions about values is the first of four basic premises behind the curriculum. When studying ethics, we easily end up thinking about political or religious questions. An epistemic question may turn out to have an inescapable aesthetic aspect. Since the various issues on the table tend to be intimately connected, a value studies curriculum is by definition heavily integrated. The most natural way to ensure integration is to build up the curriculum around core courses that secure the relevant breadth and cohesion.

The second premise is that the most fundamental questions about values have a claim on us as human beings—no matter what we take a special interest in, and no matter what we do for a living. But we tend to specialize in values, to focus on a few and more or less lose sight of the rest. Sometimes this is as it should be, but often we miss out on the fullness of life to the detriment of ourselves and others. The demands of the moment, habit, anxiety, and selfishness may shrink a person’s world to a caricature of what it could be. Nicolai Hartmann, one of the thinkers whose work has been an inspiration for the development of value studies, thought that this is the common destiny of human beings. “The tragedy of man,” he once wrote, “is that of one who, sitting at a well-laden table, is

hungry but who will not reach out his hand, because he does not see what is before him.”¹ There is enough truth in this dark yet also optimistic thought to justify a course of study that strives to combat our natural narrowness.

Value questions remain primarily “human” even in an academic context. This is the third premise. While values lend themselves to study—eminently so—no discipline, understood as a set of methods or a body of literature, can tame or appropriate them. The values of justice, beauty, and natural diversity are all studied fruitfully by experts in various contexts, for example, but their significance is pre-disciplinary and remains anchored in ordinary human life, even when addressed by academics. For that reason, the primary task of scholars dedicated to value studies is not to pursue or represent their respective disciplines, but to bring whatever expertise they have to bear on questions of general human significance.

The fourth and final premise is the most difficult to articulate, but important nonetheless. When we talk about “values,” we have in mind the goods, ends, and ideals by which we understand who we are and explain what we do. Values tend to be deeply personal, yet typically not just private. They often come into our purview as shared objects of attention and, at least to some extent, as fitting objects of reasoned conversation. In fact, they commonly seem to *call out* for conversation. As creatures who value—wonder, cherish, and desire—we need an intimate yet open social space where we can talk together, a hall of joint and living reflection. Conversation, in other words, is one of the natural expressions of our many responses to things of value and meaningful experience: bafflement, bliss, ambivalence, frustration, anxiety. There is a crucial educational aspect to such conversation. It is, among other things, a conversation that each generation owes the next. To some extent it happens informally in families and among friends, and this is of immense importance; but in these contexts the conversation often remains too sporadic, too superficial, too private, or too one-sided to do full justice to the task. That’s why we need value studies.

SELF-KNOWLEDGE, REFLECTION, AND CIVILITY

The ultimate educational ends of value studies are plural, and to some extent essentially open and contested. This is as it should be. It would be illiberal and counterproductive to assume that we could posit the *telos* of this sort of educational journey from the beginning. Nonetheless, one ideal outcome, arguably, is a deepened or refined self-knowledge. This is a personal good, but here it is important to point out that it is a civic good also. As Jean Bethke Elshtain wrote in a previous volume in the Civic Series, “people propel themselves into community and organizational life because there are things they care about, values they endorse, goods they embrace.”² For most of us, most of the time, knowing who we are and what we care about makes us more meaningfully and sure-footedly engaged in civic and political life. A striking confirmation of this thought may be found in the important work of Adam Davis, in whose Civic Reflection Project we see a sister of value studies.³

Some might worry whether a course of study that defines itself by reference to values must in some manner take the form of indoctrination. The worry is

fair enough; but it is neither specific to value studies, nor is it possible to overcome entirely in any form of education. Even studies that look purely instrumental or technical in character will involve value commitments. Implicitly or explicitly, every curriculum reveals a sense of relevance and an ideal of learning. The precise identification of these commitments may be difficult, but complete neutrality is impossible. Furthermore, there is no good reason to think that an explicit focus on values must be associated with some special bias or dogmatic modes of teaching. On the contrary, an explicit curricular focus on values may, under the right circumstances, inspire a reflectiveness that makes the educational endeavor less likely to be indoctrinatory.

In the *Euthyphro*, Plato had Socrates point out that disagreement about values—about “right and wrong, and noble and disgraceful, and good and bad”—is a common source of anger and enmity.⁴ This fact may sometimes be, or seem to be, a compelling reason for avoiding discussions about values. Some liberals, for example, dream of a neutral polity that would not commit a community to any substantial notion of the good life. Some academics pursue “value-free” science, and some educators seek to banish politics from their classrooms. Value studies is premised on the opposite thought: we cannot avoid substantial value commitments (or disagreements) in politics, science, and education, and we are often better off facing them with as much candor as we can muster. In fact, the confrontations that emerge from such conversations often have profound educational value. As we work through them, we achieve reflective depth and have occasion to practice a number of intellectual and civic virtues of great significance, not least in a democracy.

Of the various virtues needed to sustain a conversation about values, civility may be one of the most central. In a minimal sense, it marks our ability to maintain a basic respect and exhibit tolerance even when we disapprove of another person’s behavior or opinions. Civility in this sense, on occasion necessary in any public and genuine conversation about values, is probably a norm of behavior that no democratic community can do without.

The term “civility” has another usage, however, according to which it is not merely a last resort in the effort of maintaining our community in the face of disagreement, but an expression of something more positive and more ambitious. As Robert Pippin suggests, civility may be understood as “as an active attempt to recognize and help to promote each other as free beings.”⁵ While a democracy could perhaps exist without this sort of civility, one may nonetheless think of it as a profound democratic ideal, as expressing a substantial and optimistic sense of equality and solidarity. The darkest moments of political life may seem to condemn this ideal as utopian; but if we believe that some utopias should be kept on the map somehow, we might want to design some of our curricula to promote exactly that sort of civility. Value studies does that. When we foreground and face disagreements, we may also reveal deeper commonalities or discover new possibilities of harmonious diversity. In other words, while joint explorations of the good, the true, and the beautiful may reveal terrible human dilemmas and political dynamite of the most destructive kind, they are not divisive by definition. They do not just reveal the limits of freedom in a democracy, but

may help us push those limits a bit. We learn that the battle for freedom is not simply a zero-sum game. Since we don't know where the limits of collective freedom lie, hope is a civic virtue closely related to civility. The study of values keeps that hope alive and helps us prevent politics from being a sphere that simply belongs to fate.

DISCIPLINE, EXPERTISE, AND WISDOM

The value studies curriculum was not designed to facilitate what we call “disciplinary training”: the command of a certain body of literature, a special set of methods, and one particular mode of thinking. Like other curricular innovations from the past century, value studies is meant to complement the one-sided dominance of disciplines in higher education. Many of us, even when grateful for the rigorous disciplinary training we have received, have experienced how the disciplinary approach to learning may become self-serving and almost hide from view the human ends and issues for which most of us awoke to the life of learning in the first place. Arguably, this danger of losing one's ends is inherent to disciplinary training. To be alive to fundamental questions about human ends in all their

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complexity is the first business of value studies; the second is to make some sort of progress with them. There are competing conceptions of what this progress consists in, and that is as it should be. The main point here is that the insistence on staying with an issue, problem, or question of fundamental human relevance involves a certain concentration and persistence that can only be understood as a form of *discipline* in the everyday sense of that word—a capacity for focus, patience, and constancy of

purpose. Moreover, this sort of discipline is not just a private good, but a civic virtue. A democracy needs citizens with a strong and not easily diverted sense of the goods and ideals for which we do everything we do.

The focus on values fosters a deep sense of equality in the classroom. The most fundamental issues raised are those to which all human beings by virtue of their ordinary experience have some form of “privileged access.” At no moment in a conversation about values can it be ruled out that the most interesting or fruitful contribution will come from a participant who is theoretically the least prepared. Sometimes our most important questions are the ones that look simplistic or obvious. It does not follow that expertise is irrelevant. On the contrary, our discussions about values constantly benefit from expert knowledge—about literature, history, religion, anthropology, economics, statistics, technology, science, and other subjects. Being well-informed is a good thing, and a student may well be inspired by value studies to acquire and live by a certain expertise, practical or scholarly. What we learn from value studies is “simply” that the last word on fundamental human issues does not belong to the expert.

This lesson should inspire us with the courage to ask innocent questions. It should also help us overcome, as far as possible, our tendencies to snobbism, pedantry, and theoretical arrogance. The implication is that those who teach value studies must do without the kind of authority that is guaranteed at other places

of higher learning by departmental structure and students' ability to choose as their goal of study a discipline that their teachers have already mastered. They nonetheless earn respect, if they are good, as knowledgeable and imaginative designers of syllabi, as attentive and inspiring teachers, and—ideally—as possessing a little of that human quality for which there is no better name than “wisdom.” As A. N. Whitehead wrote in *The Aims of Education*, “wisdom is the way in which knowledge is held. It concerns the handling of knowledge, its selection for the determination of relevant issues, its employment to add value to our immediate experience. This mastery of knowledge, which is wisdom, is the most intimate freedom obtainable.”⁶

EQUALITY, HUMILITY, AND SOLIDARITY

Value studies is essentially a democratic form of education. This curriculum is partially built around a deep sense of human equality, and it honors virtues that are crucial for democratic citizenship. That's what we have been trying to argue so far. It is important to see, however, that the curriculum is not *fanatically* democratic; it is not closed to everything that does not bear a clear democratic stamp. While some democratic educators are intolerant of anything that challenges their democratic ideals, value studies allows us, nay *invites* us, to ask hard questions about our favored polity. As one of the most profound and sovereign ideals of our time, democracy itself is an obvious topic for a value studies curriculum.

Back in 1923, Whitehead asked a hard question about equality as the central value in the complex ideal of democracy. “We are at the threshold of a democratic age,” he wrote, “and it remains to be determined whether the equality of man is to be realised on a high level or a low level.”⁷ This statement might be a good starting point for a seminar discussion at ECLA. It invites a principled discussion about the metaphors of high and low—that is, the nature and significance of hierarchical thinking. It may also provoke the egalitarian to think hard about his attachment to equality: what exactly am I committed to? Even firmly committed democrats should be able to ponder the question, or questions, behind this statement. No doubt, some will be tempted by this occasion to think antidemocratic thoughts, but others might be inspired to deepen their understanding of and attachment to the democratic ideal. Whitehead's statement does not necessarily express the worries of a crypto-elitist. It may express a sense of human dignity that is deeply solidaristic. And it may suggest a worried question about the future of democracy: if we do not manage to realize human equality on a fairly high level, will the human race survive, and will it survive with its dignity intact? Arguably, now when the democratic age is well on its way, this question remains unanswered.

Not only would Whitehead's statement be a helpful starting point for an ECLA seminar, but it also provides a natural starting point for our final point about the significance of value studies for democratic citizenship. In order to make this point, let us develop the thoughts of the worried democrat a bit further. In this mood, we may feel a somber ambivalence about the concept of equality, as if it were a magnificent ship with a malignant stowaway. The belief that all human beings are equal has a tendency to bring with it another: the belief that every desire and satisfaction of every equal being must be equal too. Push-pin is as good as poetry, not because we have judged them to be equally good, but because there can be no judgment to make.

Who am I to judge? And who can judge me? In other words, noble egalitarianism leads many of us to (flirt with) shallow relativism. The common result, one might fear, is a character too timid to discriminate at all and defiantly proud of his own taste, whatever it happens to be. A version of Whitehead's low realization of equality could be a "democratic" society inhabited by such persons. Because they lack humility and confidence, it would be a "formal" democracy suffering from a lack of individual aspiration and civic apathy—all in the name of a misguided sense of equality.

Our own mood is not always so dark, but the danger apprehended in that mood seems real enough. The democratic danger, if we may call it that, has particular sting in modern life. Modern life has many acute observers, but for our purposes Nicolai Hartmann is particularly helpful again:

The life of man to-day is not favourable to depth of insight. The quiet and contemplation are lacking, life is restless and hurried; there is competition, aimless and without reflection. Whoever stands still for a moment is overtaken by the next. And as the claims of the outer life chase one another, so likewise do the impressions, experiences and sensations. We are always looking out for what is newest, the last thing continuously governs us and the thing before the last is forgotten ere it has been fairly seen, much less comprehended. We live from sensation to sensation. And our penetration becomes shallow, our sense of value is blunted, by snatching at the sensational. Not only is modern man restless and precipitate, dulled and blasé, but nothing inspires, touches, lays hold of his innermost being. Finally he has only an ironical and weary smile for everything. Yes, in the end he makes a virtue of his moral degradation. He elevates the *nil admirari*, his incapacity to feel wonder, amazement, enthusiasm and reverence, into a planned habit of life. Callously passing lightly over everything is a comfortable *modus vivendi*. And thus he is pleased with himself in a pose of superiority which hides his inner vacuity.⁸

The modern democratic person lives a dangerous life. It is all too easy for us to become proud, diffident, and restlessly apathetic. Some respond to this problem with denial, others with despair. Some become reactionaries or secretly begin to despise democracy. Value studies is meant to help us avoid these temptations. It is, among other things, a democratic and optimistic antidote to a democratic disease. It is a curriculum that invites students and teachers to the joint and solidaristic pursuit of high-minded equality.

NOTES

1. Nicolai Hartmann, *Ethics*, trans. Stanton Colt (London: G. Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1932), 39.
2. Jean Bethke Elshtain, "The Moral Imperatives of Civic Life" in *Civic Values, Civic Practices*, ed. Donald W. Harward (Washington, DC: Bringing Theory to Practice, 2013), 47.
3. For information about the Civic Reflection Project, see <http://www.civicreflection.org/>.
4. Plato, *Euthyphro. Apology. Crito. Phaedo. Phaedrus*, trans. Harold North Fowler, Loeb Classical Library 36 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), 27.
5. Robert Pippin, *The Ethical Status of Civility in the Persistence of Subjectivity: On the Kantian Aftermath* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 237.
6. A. N. Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), 30.
7. *Ibid.*, 69.
8. Hartmann, *Ethics*, 44–45.